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## INCORPORATION AS A LINGUISTIC PROCESS

By A. L. KROEBER

DR Sapir's recent paper on "The Problem of Noun Incorporation in American Languages"<sup>1</sup> is such a masterly interpretation of the evidence connected with this subject, even though the essay is avowedly a refutation of the thesis advanced by the present writer a few years before,<sup>2</sup> to the effect that such incorporation is a chimæra, that it remains a cause of gratification to have taken the stand which has been productive of so novel and valuable a contribution.

One point of primary importance that Dr Sapir brings out clearly is the fact that noun incorporation has no necessary or inherent connection with pronominal incorporation, as it has been called, or "rather inflection," as he aptly designates it. Dr Sapir has gone farther than the writer in pointing out that there is rather an exclusion between the two processes, in that a pronominally incorporating language should find noun incorporation unnecessary, and *vice versa*; and even though, as he says, the facts do not entirely bear out this *a priori* consideration, it is nevertheless a conception of the greatest importance in the present state of our understanding of linguistic phenomena. The custom heretofore has been to assume that noun incorporation was merely a form or phase of pronoun incorporation, or even the reverse; and, as long as this view prevailed, there was no hope of a correct analysis of such evidence as was accumulating. In fact this assumption has been the cause of a persistent misunderstanding of the subject. That the present writer's argument, which was based on the contention that the assumed connection did not exist, overshot the mark and ended by doubting well-authenticated but unexplained facts that had been called noun incorporations, must perhaps be admitted. But this

<sup>1</sup> *American Anthropologist*, (N. S.), XIII, 250-282, 1911.

<sup>2</sup> *Verh. XVI. Intern. Amerikanisten-Kongr.*, Wien, 569-576, 1909.

is of little moment in comparison with Dr Sapir's agreement that such "noun incorporation" as he has been able to establish has nothing whatever to do with so called pronominal incorporation. Until this point of view is conceded, or proved erroneous, the evidence on the question will continue to be misunderstood.

Dr Sapir takes issue with the writer's definition of noun incorporation as "the combination into one word of the noun object and of the verb functioning as the predicate of a sentence," on the ground that a morphological and a syntactical requirement are joined: in other terms, that the definition exacts not only a certain type of word formation, as is justifiable, but also a logical relation between the elements, which is unreasonable. This criticism is correct, and it can only be said in palliation of the definition that, inasmuch as the phenomenon to which it relates was not believed to exist, less attention was given to theoretical exactness of statement than to an endeavor to express what had customarily been meant by the phrase "noun incorporation." In short, the basis of the definition was historical rather than logical. As a matter of fact, one of the arguments advanced against the existence of noun incorporation as thus defined was the circumstance that incorporation of the subject noun had not been alleged, but would have to be expected in at least some cases if object incorporation were at all common. Here again Dr Sapir maintains a most commendable conservative attitude, and, instead of using the apparent absence of one form of incorporation as an argument against the existence of the other, demonstrates the occurrence of both, together with still other phases, such as adverbial and predicative. This leads to a new conception: incorporation is no longer an essentially objective process, as had usually been assumed and as the writer accepted for purposes of refutation, but is non-syntactical in its nature. However the evidence on the question may in future be interpreted, this is a logical point that compels recognition.

Dr Sapir also gives the solution of the problem—which would have been puzzling if it had not been so generally ignored—why in alleged incorporating languages incorporation sometimes takes place and sometimes does not. As the writer put this point,<sup>1</sup> the

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 574.

usual statement is to the effect that in a given language, such as Nahuatl, the object is often taken bodily into the verb, but "the 'more common' construction is to 'replace' the noun object by its pronominal equivalent. When and why it is usually replaced, and when not, are passed over. . . . An examination of analyzed Nahuatl texts shows occasional occurrences of what may be noun incorporation, but an infinitely greater number of instances of independence of the noun object. *Until a reason is given for these instances, there must be legitimate hesitation in accepting as true cases of incorporation the fewer possible or apparent instances of it.*"

This reason is now given, and with it falls one of the principal theoretical objections to the acceptance of the facts as hitherto stated. Starting with Nahuatl, but applying the same distinction also to other languages, Dr Sapir finds that true "noun incorporation" tends to occur chiefly in verbs of general or permanent, opposed to particular or temporary, application. This distinction was apparently first brought out by Dr W. Lehmann in an article published so shortly before the composition of the present author's essay as to have escaped his notice. Nahuatl can say either "I-it-eat the flesh" or "I-flesh-eat"; but the former sentence means "I am eating flesh," the latter "I am a flesh eater." Not only is there a distinction here, but it is an important and a reasonable one. The whole process rests on a point that at once appeals to linguistic sense, just as the old unlimited assertions did not. The difference between what is inherent and what is accidental has frequently been found to be expressed in various languages, as in the use of distinct sets of possessive pronominal elements. It is a difference of wide and often most significant value, and the only surprising feature concerning it in the present connection is that it has not been made clear previously. It may be added that the distinction is not entirely foreign even to English, which formally does not recognize it, in that agent nouns such as "eater," "runner," "trapper," "fighter," "cobbler," "drummer," are used habitually if not exclusively to denote occupation or customary action. It is probable that in some languages noun incorporation does not depend on any significance of permanent action or inherent quality, but

at least there is now every prospect that in such cases the phenomenon will be found bound up with some idea or trait of analogous type. The road to explicit limiting conditions is at least pointed out.

Dr Sapir's use of Dr Lehmann's discovery and his application of it to other languages make clear another point. As the former says in conclusion: "The characteristic fact about the process [noun incorporation] is that certain syntactic relations are expressed by what in varying degree may be called composition or derivation." Here is the crux of the whole problem and its answer: *noun incorporation is not grammatical but etymological*. We ourselves say "flesh-eaters" and "ship-builders"; but, as these terms are collocations of one noun with another though deverbal noun, we do not and should not consider them as instances of noun incorporation in the verb. They are simply compound nouns.<sup>1</sup> Because we can not say "to flesh-eat"<sup>2</sup> and Nahuatl can, it is obvious that there is a most important point of difference between the two languages; but the fact nevertheless remains that there is a fundamental identity in that the terms expressing the ideas of flesh and of eating can be combined into a single word in both idioms by an etymological process.

The difference is that English, like other Aryan languages, freely permits compound nouns,<sup>3</sup> but does not tolerate compound verbs,<sup>4</sup> whereas Uto-Aztekan possesses both. This is rendered doubly clear by the occurrence in Paiute—as well as in other Shoshonean dialects, it may be added—of compounds consisting of two verbs and functioning as verbs. Such compounds have a

<sup>1</sup> The author says, page 570: "*Man-eater* is not incorporation but composition because *eater* is functionally a noun." When Dr Sapir, page 256, says: "'Man' + 'eater' is not morphologically equal to 'man-eat' + 'er'" he puts the same idea into a prettier and more exact form.

<sup>2</sup> Though "to housekeep" has some usage.

<sup>3</sup> That is, compounds which contain at least one noun and which as a unit are nouns.

<sup>4</sup> That is, compounds which contain at least one verb and as a unit are verbs. The only exception is furnished by combinations of preposition or allied adverbial element (such as the negative) with a verb: understand, offset, undo; and such are possibly derivative, if not semigrammatical, rather than compositional. If Aryan were an American Indian language, the elements in-, con-, de- would almost certainly be discussed in connection with grammar rather than formal etymology.

number of times been mentioned as occurring in other languages, and it is strange that they have not aroused more interest, as they are entirely unthinkable in those forms of speech in which their discoverers, and all philologists, thought and wrote. They now acquire an added significance, and it is reasonable to ask that the existence of "noun incorporation" be at least inquired into in those idioms that may be reported as possessing binary compound verbs: the two traits can be expected to go hand in hand in at least some other cases, perhaps customarily.

Carrying the idea still farther, to its logical opposite, we reach a condition such as is found in Iroquois, where noun incorporation, that is to say composition of noun and verb, is not only frequent but in some circumstances necessary, whereas the composition of two nouns into one noun is absolutely forbidden. This method of linguistic procedure is so radically different from our Indo-European one as to be startling.<sup>1</sup> But at least we need no longer hesitate at accepting the doctrine that such a highly synthetic language as Iroquois can not compound noun with noun, since we know that it must, in most cases, compound noun with verb.

In short, it is clear that four classes or types of languages must be recognized: those that permit compound nouns, but not compound verbs, such as Aryan; those that allow compound verbs but not nouns, such as Iroquois; those that permit both, such as Uto-Aztekan; and those that tolerate neither, as for instance Eskimo. Theoretically the distinction is an obvious one and has perhaps been made; but, as a general classification inductively arrived at, it does not seem to have been employed. Of course "noun incorporation" can not occur in languages of the first and fourth types. But conversely there will always be reason to suspect, until contrary evidence dispels the possibility in any particular case, that "noun incorporation" may be found in any language of the second or third classes.

This close relation of "noun incorporation" to purely composi-

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<sup>1</sup> *Anthropos*, v, 215, 1910. The statement was originally made by J. N. B. Hewitt *American Anthropologist*, 1893, and is not contradicted by F. Boas, *Putnam Anniversary Volume*, 427-460, 1909.

tional processes tends further to stamp it as of an etymological nature. "Pronominal incorporation," on the other hand, will probably be admitted to be, as both Dr Sapir and the author hold, essentially grammatical or inflectional. This brings us back once more, and with added emphasis, to the primary thesis that the two processes have nothing to do with one another, and that their being brought into connection only obscures the understanding of each. It was said before<sup>1</sup> that "strictly, pronominal incorporation does not exist" and that it was only justifiable to employ the phrase on account of its established usage, if properly understood. The same statement can now be made of "noun incorporation." Accurately speaking, the noun is not "incorporated" into the verb, but compounded with it. One might just as well describe binary compound nouns in Greek or German as "incorporations" of one noun into another, because the second of the two elements retains case and number inflections and is treated in the sentence as if it were single, while the first element is reduced to stem-form. What is important is the fact that in some languages noun and verb, or verb and verb, can be compounded into a verb. This is as important and as striking as the fact that in many languages pronominal affixes or inflections are used with objective reference, instead of only subjectively, as in our own languages; but neither process is so radically diverse from processes perfectly familiar from these languages, that there is any necessity for designating it by a term intended to imply characteristics unparalleled and unrepresented in European speech. When Nahuatl prefixes to the verb the objective pronominal element, we have a trait that is not fundamentally or essentially of a different nature from the suffixion to the Latin verb of a subjective pronominal element. And just so, when the former language or Iroquois under certain conditions compounds a noun stem with a verb, we are confronted by a phenomenon of exactly the same type and order as when English or German compounds a noun stem with a noun.

In short, the term "incorporation" is a delusion, whether applied to pronoun or to noun. It must be relegated to the same cate-

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 571.

gory as other antiquated catch-words such as "agglutination," which like it originated in the assumption that the languages of so called uncivilized people must contain certain features of a kind totally different from those characteristic of Europeans—and incidentally too, features of an inferior order,—and which have found their chief vogue and employment not among serious painstaking students of language but among doctrinaires, compilers, and those false popularizers who think to diffuse knowledge by giving a phrase instead of an idea.

Dr Sapir's paper is invaluable. It shows exactly and precisely what takes place in a number of languages under those circumstances which have been designated as incorporations. If only two or three investigators of single languages had deployed on these the critical acumen and breadth of treatment with which he approaches half a dozen, the present question would long ago have been disposed of. It is also thankless to quarrel about names, especially as Dr Sapir has illumined the actual phenomena, above all in showing that they are essentially compositional. But just as his dissertation went beyond the writer's essay, it also seems to need supplementing. If "incorporation" is to be understood to denote only one phase of a long-familiar method of word building which differs from other phases of the same method not in any greater degree of "embodiment" but merely in affecting the verb instead of the noun, well and good: then there is incorporation. But if "noun incorporation" is to imply a process entirely peculiar and distinctive in kind, without parallel in our own languages, then "noun incorporation," like "pronominal incorporation," is a complete misconception of facts and a fallacy.

In fine, something that for better or worse has been called "noun incorporation," and which in precisely the same form does not occur in European languages, is to be found in certain American tongues; but, barring the particular application of the process, there is nothing in it that is not present in all languages that compound in any way. Just as every language except the completely analytical ones "agglutinates" if there is such a thing as "agglutination" at all, so every language "incorporates" or com-



pounds. It is thoroughly misleading to designate the same process respectively "composition" and "incorporation" according as one has in mind his own or other forms of speech. Some day philologists will approach their profession not with the assumption that languages must differ in kind or in being relatively better or worse, but with the assumption that exactly the same fundamental processes run through them all, and with the realization that it is only by starting from the conception of their essential unity of type and method that their interesting and important diversities can be understood.

The conclusions of the foregoing discussion can be summarized as follows:

1. "Pronominal incorporation" and "noun incorporation" are different and not connected.
2. "Pronominal incorporation" is a grammatical or inflectional process.
3. "Noun incorporation" is, at least sometimes and perhaps always, a compositional or etymological process, which differs from the familiar process of noun composition only in resulting in words of another part of speech.
4. All languages belong to one of four classes according as they form compound nouns, compound verbs, both, or neither.
5. There is no evidence of the existence of any kind of "incorporation" that so far as its process or method is concerned is different from processes occurring in European languages, and it is more reasonable to assume that there can be no such difference than that there must be.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,

MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY,

AFFILIATED COLLEGES, SAN FRANCISCO.